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OUR NATIONAL SUPERSTITION.

BY BARRETT WENDELL, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH IN HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

FOR a good many years I chanced to be a member of the Harvard Committee on Admission from other Colleges. The principal duty of this committee is to scrutinize, with what care proves possible, degrees presented as credentials by students who desire to become candidates for degrees at Harvard. I have no right to speak for any of my colleagues, past or present. That wise man who is president of Harvard College always requests us to make clear in public utterances that no Harvard man's opinion may ever pretend to more authority than happens to reside in the particular Harvard man who utters it. With this reservation, however,—that, throughout this discussion, I have neither the right nor the wish to implicate anybody else,—I have no hesitation in saying that my experience as a committee-man long ago led me to views of American education less complacent than those which now seem general. For, very clearly, there are few colleges in America from which we were not sometimes—I had almost said often—confronted with Bachelors of Arts who seemed virtually uneducated. They supposed themselves educated, all the while; and, what is more, the fact that they possessed degrees proved that numerous academic authorities officially believed these far from accomplished persons to be such as could satisfactorily pass the tests which are intended to protect the standard of education in this country. Naturally, I was driven to ask myself, now and again, what on earth that word “education” means.

The answer was not so easy as the question. The word is so familiar nowadays that we rarely stop to think how vaguely it is generally used. But, even though many of us may have framed something like definitions of it for ourselves, I doubt

whether any of us could at present venture to define it with much hope that his definition should command general assent. For the moment, accordingly, I shall not try to define it; I shall use it as vaguely as we are apt to hear it used every day of our lives. There is a fact about that use which, for our purposes, is far more important than any definition could be. Undefined and indefinite as it is, the word "education" is just now a magic one; from the Atlantic to the Pacific, it is the most potent with which you can conjure money out of public chests or private pockets. Let social troubles declare themselves anywhere—lynchings, strikes, trusts, immigration, racial controversies, whatever you chance to hold most threatening, and we are gravely assured on every side that education is the only thing which can preserve our coming generations from destruction. What is more, as a people we listen credulously to these assurances. We are told, and we believe, and we evince magnificent faith in our belief, that our national salvation must depend on education.

Whoever has travelled in both Europe and America must have plenty of visual memories to illustrate the present consequences of this national conviction of ours. Among the most dominant architectural monuments of the Old World are the great churches and religious houses everywhere erected throughout the Christian centuries by vast grants and gifts. They imply the abiding faith throughout old Europe that salvation could best be assured by unstinting generosity to the Church, which represented divine authority on earth. Sometimes, these structures were founded by corporate bodies—cities, guilds, whatever else,—who believed that special civility to divinity might win them special heavenly favor. Sometimes, they were founded by private sinners of fortune, who had been authoritatively assured that such foundations and monuments might have happy influence on the chances of their jeopardized souls. No doubt, there were noble ideals beneath it all; but these noble ideals were complicated and obscured by various less admirable states of mind and feeling. The enlightened temper of our own age and country is apt to discern these inferior motives more distinctly; and it has long been disposed to group them under the conveniently vague heading of "mediæval superstition."

In contrast to the beautiful embodiments of such superstition, which still make dreamily romantic so many of the towns and the landscapes of Europe, this surging new country of ours, proud of

its enlightenment,—I know not whether school geographies still describe Europe as “civilized” and republican America as “enlightened,”—can begin to point to dominant architectural facts of widely different character and purpose. In most of our towns and cities, particularly as you travel westward, the most stately and impressive structures are not churches or religious houses. They are rather the abiding places of schools, and colleges, and public libraries, freely devoted to the education of everybody. These structures, to be sure, lack the dreamy beauty of romantic fancy; but they are the best tokens which the munificence of our country could give that our national faith is unshaken. On education, we apparently believe, and on education alone, our national salvation depends. Sometimes, our temples of education have been founded by public bodies, from Congress itself to town meetings, who still seem unwaveringly confident that, however lax they may be about other things, faithful devotion to the interests of education will go far to atone for their errors. Sometimes, these sanctuaries of our national cult have been founded by private benefactors, whose motives occasionally seem analogous to those which prompted the pious munificences of mediæval sinners. For, ask any American what we shall do to be saved, and, if he speak his mind, he will probably bid us educate our fellow men.

In all this, when one stops to consider, there is a somewhat disturbing likeness to the superstition which nourished the now fading splendors of religious foundations throughout mediæval Europe. The men who laid these foundations never knew precisely how they were going to work. Assured, however, that religious foundations would at once work wonders and reflect inestimable credit on founders, they gave and gave, until the Church waxed fatter than the laity. Wherefore, at last, as Protestant tradition has kept busily in mind, the great good which ensued from endowments of the Church began to glow very feebly before lay eyes in general. The educational enthusiasm which now possesses our free and enlightened country does not present so marked a contrast to all this as might have been comfortably expected. When we begin to inquire, we are apt to discover that Americans in general do not know exactly what education is; and, furthermore, that they have extremely nebulous ideas of what it can accomplish. They are content with the assurance that in education lies salvation. They believe so. They give and give, ac-

cordingly, with what looks very like blind faith that they may thus justify those phases of themselves which most need justification. So far, no doubt, our institutions of learning have not waxed fat enough to excite much lay envy; yet, even already, American education is beginning to show symptoms like some among those which aroused lay hostility to the mediæval Church. Our comic papers, for example, have long found highly available any trite jests about the follies and the uselessness of college boys, and sometimes even of college girls; and I do not see how any one can doubt that American society will soon be obviously encumbered with certain vast, if respectable, mendicant orders of scholars—such as the male and the female Doctors of Philosophy.

The conclusion to which this line of thought obviously leads is disturbing. It has so often been my temperamental misfortune to express myself in a manner which has appeared frivolous that I may, perhaps, be pardoned for explicitly setting down what this conclusion at first meant to me. I have never in my life been more deeply stirred than when I finally realized what I have just been trying to explain; namely, that, in many aspects, the present mood of our country concerning education is neither more nor less than a mood of blind mediæval superstition.

My first impulse from that discovery was one of revulsion, of recoil. I felt utterly iconoclastic, like those seventeenth-century Puritans who defiled and defaced the glories of the Lady Chapel at Ely; or like Emerson, proclaiming with all his serene insolence to what still held itself his Christian congregation that, for lack of personal interest in such ceremony, he would no longer comfort the faithful with the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. It was the memory of such honest iconoclasms as these which checked my iconoclastic impulse. Christianity is none the less a spiritual force because, now and again, its spirit has become enshrouded in a mist of symbols too thick for ordinary human sight to penetrate. Nor are these symbols themselves to be disdained for the mere reason that many honest people can discern in them nothing better than idols. The fact that truth is sometimes dimmed by superstition no more means that truth is nowhere than the evanescent fogs of my own New Hampshire seaboard mean that there is no sun. Rather, indeed, we should remember that there is need of our vital sun to raise them.

Thus I began to ask myself what living truth underlay that

educational faith of ours, which on the surface seemed so densely superstitious. And here I could find little help in listening to the apostles of the hour. I was trained, you see,—so far as I was trained at all,—when Harvard was still something like an orthodox school of old-fashioned learning. That training made me, so far as it made me anything, not a technical scholar, and still less a man of science, but only a man of letters. Had I been a scholar, in the modern acceptation of the term, or a man of science, I might, perhaps, have discerned in the vagaries of educational literature something else than a mere man of letters can find there. It is possible, conceivably it is more than possible, that modern pedagogics may be struggling out of darkness into some more divine light than has been vouchsafed us yet. It is equally possible that mere men of letters may be only stray survivals of a past epoch, soon to be extinct. But, all the while, it is not possible to deny that, so far, the utterances of our pedagogic contemporaries present themselves, to such of us as survive, as things more archaic, more primally elementary, than our own. The writings of many authorities on education seem to us like the fanatical utterances of over-confident political reformers, vaunting untested panaceas. The writings of others seem like the alchemic gropings of those old pretenders to science who never got beyond explosive experiments in search of the Philosopher's Stone. At best, the confusion of tongues bespeaks an intellectual Babel.

As a man of letters, bewildered by such environment, I was consequently impelled to seek for myself what truth this bewilderment might conceal. Or, better, I was wholesomely forced to give myself the clearest account I could, of how the truth which firmly warrants our national faith in education could be perceived by eyes like mine. One thing was soon evident; there are solid historical facts on which that national faith, however superstitious its vagaries, may justly and firmly be based.

Take a single example. From our national beginnings, the history of our country has involved an experiment in democracy greater in scale and in scope than any previously attempted. One difference between this and elder systems of polity is that the elder gave factitious importance to certain distinctions of rank, which we discarded, once for all. Manifestly, these distinctions and the motives which they excited had not always proved able to place deserving men in positions of public control. One of our fervent

national hopes was that unprecedented freedom of suffrage might tend to develop leaders who should really be worthy and able. Now, a familiar fact, obvious to anybody, is that, throughout the country, our first century of national experiment gave preponderant prominence and power to the profession of the law. An equally obvious fact is that, among American professions and occupations during the nineteenth century, that of the law was most apt to contain men who had availed themselves of every educational opportunity within their reach. It is hardly excessive to say that throughout the nineteenth century the American bar proved itself a true intellectual aristocracy. In free competition, it forced itself to the fore; it asserted and justified its recognized leadership. And the secret of its superiority seemed to lie partly, even greatly, in the fact that everywhere, among other men otherwise his equals, an American lawyer had generally had the advantage of more thorough education. This is only one conspicuous example of a clear fact; quite apart from what some people call higher considerations, the practical experience of our American republic has tended to show, in a thousand ways, that education is practically worth while—that, throughout America, educated men have a palpable advantage in any struggle for political or social existence.

Yet, when one came to examine the actual education which these successful persons had enjoyed, it seemed monstrously unreasonable. It was based on the traditions of the Renaissance in Europe; and these traditions assumed that whoever was ever to know anything must begin by devoting laborious years, which he should never see again, to the acquisition of a little Latin, and less Greek, and less mathematics still. After which, and only after which, he might devote himself to so much technical study of his chosen subject or profession as circumstances should permit. The system certainly worked; to prove that, you have only to open those catalogues of New England Colleges which record the names of men who took the Bachelor's degree between 1800 and 1850. But, plainly stated, the system looked even more repugnant to plain common sense than it was efficacious.

What is more, these finished products of our traditional education were not usually expert in the matters which they had pretended to study. Even if they had been able to read the classical languages easily and to apply algebraic processes to the question

of how to make both ends meet, there might well have remained in the mind of any critical enquirer a question as to whether the energy involved in such acquisitions might not have been better directed. But, after years of work in classics, most college graduates—at least among such as ever came to my knowledge—were unable to make anything out of a Greek page or a Latin which they had not studied up for purposes of examination; and in mathematics, their real attainment, as a rule, demonstrably stopped short at long division. The thing certainly seemed preposterous, not only to people who had lacked the benefits of this higher education which the public was called on to pay for more and more, but also to people who had experienced the disheartening dulness of it. Education, everybody agreed, was a good thing; yet to almost everybody its condition seemed unintelligent and unreasonable.

Obviously, this state of affairs needed reform. Obviously, a process which, even in an unreasonable state, was so generally efficient, might be expected to work miracles if once duly rationalized. For example, if some years of reluctant struggle with Latin grammar could be replaced by an equal amount of intelligent study of one's own language, it would seem to follow that the English language would presently be handled by graduates of American schools and colleges in a manner evidently superior to any previously known or imagined. Or, if unintelligent recitation of geometrical propositions could give place to field study of the rocks and the wild-flowers of one's own neighborhood, the children of the future would not only become alert observers of natural phenomena, but incidentally they would find their school hours—hours which had been so dreary in our time—changed to hours which should glow heavenly, irradiating a finally beautiful and intelligible earth. Above all, if there were any point concerning which the temper of educational reformers tended to agree, it was this: if pupils in the past had gained so much from unintelligent study of matters which did not interest them, and which, in any event, were of no practical use, there could be no question that pupils in the future must gain incalculably more from intelligent study of matters inherently interesting and obviously useful.

The whole new system of education, from a child's first school to a man's last degree, is based on this principle, which we may call the principle of the kindergarten—not literally, of course,

but in general temper. You must try to find out just what everybody likes best, and then help him to do it as kindly as you can. You must interfere with him as little as may be—only when his impulses take a form which threatens to damage somebody else. Incidentally, if you can induce him, from early childhood, to take pleasure in handiwork,—in making something ornamental or useful,—so much the better. And, particularly, whatever he is about, he should be incited to diligence not by the selfish spur of competition, or by the degrading fear of a spanking, but by the stimulus of delight in work, or, better still, by the encouragement of altruistic enthusiasm, such as sometimes gladdens the birthday breakfast-table of papa with a rather oily paper-cutter, sandpapered by the diligent hands of baby.

There can be little question that the new education in all its stages, has turned out far more paper-cutters and the like than the old ever pretended to. In which parable we may include, once for all, its achievements in the way of technical and special training. The paper-cutters in question certainly serve a pleasant domestic purpose, and they do no harm; they are not of such quality as seriously to affect the mercantile prospects of those who deal in the real article. Under the older system, on the other hand, hardly anybody could make paper-cutters at all. But, granting this, there does arise a question as to whether this making of paper-cutters, in an atmosphere suffused with sentimental kindness, is proving itself, on the whole, a more efficient educational process than the less reasonable one which its sweet reasonableness is now tending to uproot and to supplant.

Such a question, I suppose, each of us must answer for himself. The pedagogues—and their noble army is at present innumerable—hold that, if the new system is not yet always and obviously superior in its results, it ought to be, and therefore that in due time it will be. The whole thing looks impressive in their habitual reading—namely, in educational reports. Wherever educational facts do not come within the range of one's own experience, indeed, it is hard to resist the assumption that this new education is rapidly approaching excellence. All the assumption in the world, however, cannot belie experience; and I am much deceived if the experience I have met with at Harvard, during the past twenty years, is widely different from that which must come to teachers at any American college.

In the first place, the new methods and the new subjects have not produced a higher standard of attainment. English, for example, is directly taught at schools a great deal more than it used to be, and taught, furthermore, in what are believed to be freshly vital ways. But, so far as I can see, the boys who come to college nowadays know their English just about as well as the boys of my time knew their Latin,—certainly no better. In brief, human nature remains human as ever; and, no matter what they study, or how, human children will rarely learn a bit more than they can help. Teachers of pedagogics have much to say about delight in work. For my part, I begin to think that I was right in childhood, when I held such delight to be *prima facie* evidence that a boy needed medicine.

Again, and what is far more serious, year by year, it seems to me, as the newer educational notions have supplanted the elder at schools which fit boys for college, those boys prove, when they get to college, flabbier and flabbier in mind. I remember a talk with a Harvard sophomore a few years ago which will illustrate what I mean. He was a pleasantly disposed boy, as Harvard sophomores are apt to be; and, finding himself unexpectedly aware that his mind lacked cultivation, he did me the honor to inquire how I thought he might best proceed to cultivate it. I answered that his first business should be to take in hand some hard and solid subject, and therewith to plough out the traces of the kindergarten. The look of wonder in his big brown eyes lingers with me still. How on earth did I know, he asked, that he had been to a kindergarten at all? I doubt whether I quite succeeded in explaining myself. I had recognized the fact from his inability to keep his attention fixed, for any perceptible length of time, on anything which did not happen to excite his interest; and my explanation appeared not to do so. His culture, I regret to say, seemed little improved when I met him last, about to proceed to our own degree of Bachelor of Arts. The new education had him fairly in its clutches, and the buffets of life had not yet begun to loosen them.

Again still, the actual methods of the new education are sometimes startling: a few months ago, for example, I discovered in the Freshman Class at Harvard a student, of fairly robust mental quality, who found great trouble in alphabetically sorting some hundred or two manuscripts, endorsed with the names of the

writers. A few questions revealed the cause of his perplexity. He had been taught at school to read and to write and to cipher fluently; but he had never been called upon to learn the alphabet. The order of the letters therein had impressed his school-teachers as arbitrary, and therefore not reasonable; and, desiring to be purely reasonable, these teachers had presented the twenty-six letters to him as independent phonetic symbols, of which the meaning was to be inferred from experience of them as they appeared in various words. He could spell, I subsequently discovered, rather better than I should have expected. But what use he could make of a dictionary, the Lord alone knows. After all, I suppose, the order of words in dictionaries may perhaps be held, by reasonable pedagogues, unreasonably and obsoletely arbitrary.

It was not so in our time. There can hardly be alive to-day an educated man of fifty who will not shudder when he remembers how many benumbing youthful hours he had to pass over the abhorrent pages of Andrews, or of Liddell and Scott,—more repellent, if possible, than those other horrors, the Latin and the Greek Grammars, which the methods of the older time interposed between the vital meaning of classical literature and any faithful schoolboy. No one ever recoiled from that drudgery more rebelliously than I; few, I think, can have condemned it much more freely. Through many years, extending far into my life as a college teacher, I did not cease to resent the fact that, after ten honest years of work with Latin, and six or eight with Greek, I put those studies despairingly aside, unable to read a page in either language. The same was generally true of my friends and classmates. We had been victims, it seemed, for years of an educational superstition far more blind than any which has succeeded it. Yet now that the results of what pretend to be more enlightened methods are slowly defining themselves, I begin to wonder whether, evil as our fate was, the fate of those who have followed us be not, in a chaotic way of its own, more evil still. We were ill educated, no doubt; but, from my point of view as a college teacher, the younger generations often seem hardly educated at all.

And here I find myself using the term "education" with a meaning more nearly precise than before. Education is a matter partly of information and partly of training. The latter phase of it seems to me the more important. A satisfactorily educated man distinguishes himself from an uneducated one chiefly because,

for general purposes, his faculties are better under his control. An educated man, in short, when confronted with new or unexpected problems can generally use his wits better than an uneducated one. Here we are on purely practical ground. The simple question becomes one of plain fact, not of prejudice. What kind of education makes people most frequently efficient for general purposes? Honestly answering this, though I am myself professor of a radical and practical subject, I am bound to say that purely practical considerations go far to justify the old system of classics and mathematics, in comparison with anything newer.

Though I cannot be sure that anybody else would agree with me throughout, I have some warrant for this opinion in my memory of a recurrent discussion in the Harvard faculty. At various times, the requirements for admission to Harvard College have been altered, in the interest of educational reform. On each of these occasions, our more radical colleagues have desired that our department of English should propose, as a subject for admission, what they called Advanced English,—that is, a plan for the study of English in schools which should fairly be equivalent to advanced study of the classics or of mathematics, and which might consequently be held a complete alternative. On each of these occasions, our department of English have unanimously declined to propose any such thing. And our ground, as I have understood it, has been that we could not conceive how any plan for the study of English in schools could be anything like an educational equivalent for the advanced studies which our radical colleagues desired Advanced English to supplant. In other words, we have unanimously believed that a man who is going seriously to study English at college may best prepare himself for such study by a severe preliminary training in the studies which have regularly preceded English throughout the past.

We have been reproached, accordingly, as not believing in our own subject; we have been told that we were blinded by outworn superstition. Is there any mystic power, we have been asked, in the fetiches of the schools? Can unmeaning words, just because they chance to be in Greek or in Latin, work miracles? Are we so mediæval as to bow in awe before a scholastic Abracadabra? Questions like that are really staggering. What is more, our classical and mathematical colleagues have helped us very little toward the finding of an answer to them. They repeat orthodox

formulas about the "humanities;" and the formulas of orthodoxy, infinitely edifying to the faithful, give small comfort to sceptics. Yet the fact remains, that no orthodoxy can remain vital through the centuries unless its formulas enfold some truth which must give us pause. And what the truth is which made the elder training so much more efficient than the new is beginning, at least for me, to shine clear.

The practical aim of a general education, I have said, is such training as shall enable a man to devote his faculties intently to matters which of themselves do not interest him. The power which enables a man to do so is obviously the power of voluntary, as distinguished from spontaneous, attention. Any one, for example, can read the items in a newspaper. With no more interruption than occasional skipping, any one can read a novel which interests him. Any one can keep his wits fixed on a well written play, particularly if the performers possess the advantage of personal attraction. But the moment anything be long or dull—sermon, poem, or problem, it is all one—only those can keep their wits from wandering who have somehow learned to control them. In other words, whatever interests people commands their spontaneous attention, and accordingly such power of concentration as is naturally theirs. But if a man is to make anything whatever out of a matter which does not interest him, he must concentrate his powers on it by a strenuous act of voluntary attention.

It is precisely this faculty of voluntary attention which education, in the broadest sense, can most surely cultivate. The fact that it can do so is patent, when you consider what education has actually done. The faculty of voluntary attention, for example, obviously distinguished the American lawyers of the nineteenth century from their fellow citizens, of whom they were so apt to take the lead. That faculty clearly distinguished the college students of thirty years ago from the flabbier students of to-day. And that faculty, I believe, such persons as these, whom we may hastily take as typical, gained largely from that elder system of education to which they were forced to submit. And no one, I believe, can gain it in anything like the same degree from methods as yet devised by apostles of the kindergarten. The elder education, to be sure, cultivated voluntary attention, not because it specifically insisted that pupils should unintelligently devote tedious years to grammars and dictionaries of Latin and

Greek, or to lifeless variants of the extinct vitality of Euclid. But, unknowingly, it cultivated the faculty well. Through daily hours, throughout all their youthful years, it compelled boys, in spite of every human reluctance, to fix their attention on matters which, of themselves, could never have held attention for five minutes together.

No doubt, plenty of subjects other than classics or mathematics could have been made to serve this purpose and could be made to now. You can hardly imagine a subject, essentially uninteresting, which would not reward plodding work with a similar result—with substantial ignorance of the matter studied, but with increasingly and lastingly muscular power of voluntary attention. The only actual practical virtue which lies in the traditional subjects comes mostly from the accident that they are traditional. As a natural consequence, they have acquired, through the centuries, a degree of precision not yet attained by any rivals. Even unsympathetic and unintelligent teachers can, therefore, keep closer watch of them. If the attention of boys who study classics or mathematics begins to wander, it can instantly be perceived as vagrant. If it errs, its errors can swiftly and certainly be corrected. And the very fact that the classical languages are dead, and that the abstractions of mathematics must generally seem repellently lifeless, is part of the secret of their educational vitality. Of late years, it has often been supposed that training in natural science would do more for the power of voluntary attention, and therefore would have a higher educational value, than training in the old humanities. So far as my observation has gone, this has not yet proved the case. And one reason why it has not, I am disposed to think, is because the natural sciences are apt nowadays to prove a shade too interesting. In the end, accordingly, like other alluring things, they often excite an attention more nearly spontaneous than voluntary. If so, the study of them would inevitably result rather in technical information and habitual aptitude of a special kind, than in any broad general training, available for any other service than that immediately concerned.

The classics and mathematics have, doubtless, been tyrannical, and, what is worse, they have been supercilious. There can be little doubt that the day of their dominance is past; and that resentment of their pretensions will long blind the educational au-

thorities of our democratic country and age to the real nature of their educational potence. Of all educational superstitions, we may freely admit, none is more instantly apparent than that which worships the classics and mathematics as idols. And yet the newer educational superstition, which bows the knee to pedagogics, is beginning to seem more mischievously idolatrous still. For behind the dethroned idols there was an orthodox truth, not yet discernible behind the new; and the education which resulted from the elder system had a virtue which must somehow be revived, if the new is to justify the magnificent and generous faith of our still youthful America. No education, I believe, can serve much practical purpose, in training men for the perplexing diversities of practical life, unless it base itself on the training, throughout the flexible years, of that faculty of voluntary attention which only in maturity should be suffered to range among the matters of its choice or of its incidental duty. Any education, on the other hand, which does this work is a priceless boon, not only to those who have won it, but to the country of which they are citizens.*

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* This article substantially reproduces a Commencement address, delivered at Haverford College, on June 10, 1904.